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How Modernity arrived to Godavari

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Abstract

This article traces the way modern institutions emerged in one region of British-ruled India, the Godavari delta of coastal Andhra, during the early nineteenth century. Rejecting recently popular cultural theories and the vague language of 'multiple modernities', it suggests that modernity can be defined as the practical effort to govern subjects perceived as strangers with abstract and general categories. But, arguing that our conception of modernity needs to be limited, the article suggests that modern institutions always rely on non-modern ways of life: the rule of law depends on ideas about individual honour; bureaucracy on family connections and affective idioms of loyalty; rational interests are coordinated by archaic idioms of political leadership. The peculiarity history of modernity in imperial India was marked not by the limited or partial imposition of modern practices, but by the British regime's reluctance to accept the legitimacy of the very non-modern forms of power it's relied on. Tracing this process in the Godavari delta, the article shows how a regime with limited local resources asserted the monopolistic authority of its structures of government, but in doing so it corroded its own capacity to exercise power. Local institutions which had coordinated local productive resources were undermined, but alternative forms of local leadership were unable to emerge. The consequence was famine in the 1830s, and an effort to refound the imperial regime in the 1840s by imposing British power on the region's natural resources.

The last seventy years have seen the rise, fall and strange survival of modernity as an essential category in the way scholars try to understand change in both European and non-European societies. Recent debates emerge from the wreckage of a story about the world's transition to modernity dominant in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, modernisation theory twisted complex and often profoundly pessimistic strands of early twentieth century European thought, particularly the work of Max Weber, into an optimistic, all-encompassing narrative. That narrative could be joined by every part of the rapidly decolonising world could participate in, albeit at different moments in time. In this post-war story, modernity was many things at one moment. It encompassed formal beliefs such as individualism and secularism, attitudes like the work ethic, institutions (the rule of law, markets and democracy), material practices (industrial production) and technologies (road, steamships). As the proponent of a late version of modernisation theory Samuel P. Huntington mid-

described it, modernity is ‘a multifaceted process involving changes in all areas of human thought and activity’.¹

From the late 1960s, the intellectual power and coherence of this unitary concept of modernity collapsed. As David Washbrook summarises it, the critique involved three arguments. First, the violent reality of the twentieth century broke apart the idea of a monolithic unitary modernity in which culture, institutions and technologies all progressed at the same even pace. Second, historical research and contemporary analysis both noticed the endurance of supposedly traditional pre-modern forms of life into modern societies, craft production or religious institutions, for example. Finally, modernity’s apparent universality started to be identified merely as an effect of European and North American power.²

Despite the apparent devastation these criticisms wrought on the concept, scholars have refused to kick the modernity habit. A once dominant category has been fractured and reshaped, but it has remained vital to the way scholars think about change in South Asia and beyond. Revisions have taken two forms. One group of scholars retained the idea of Europe as the starting point for a particular form of modernity. They then trace the complex, locally-rooted ways in which non-Europeans responded to and reconstituted modern practices of life for themselves. From this point of view modernity itself was a holistic social and cultural system rooted in the particularities of European history. But it spawned ‘alternative modernities’ which opened up spaces for South Asian agency and autonomy.³

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968), 32; Founding texts of modernisation theory include Seymour Martin Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy, Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959), 69–105; Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action. A Study in Social Theory with Special Reference to a Group of European Writers* (New York, NY, McGraw-Hill, 1937), each of which attempted to integrate belief, institutions and practice into a single system. Parsons text was ignored until the 1940s. Classic works on empire and India which use a similar framework include John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (August 1, 1953), 1–15; Bernard S. Cohn, “From Indian Status to British Contract,” *The Journal of Economic History* 21, no. 4 (December 1961), 613–628.

² David Washbrook, “From Comparative Sociology to Global History: Britain and India in the Pre-History of Modernity,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, 4 (1997), 413–16.

³ P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ, 1993); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” *Public Culture* 11, 1 (1999), 1–18, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); K.

A second set of scholars have revised the category of modernity to offer a more dispersed genealogy of the origins of the modern world. This group of early modern social and economic rather than modern cultural historians, led by David Washbrook, argue too that the expansion of empire subjected the rest of the world to ‘universalising and homogenising forces from Europe’. But Europe’s modernity was entangled within the growth of market economics and bureaucratic forms of government which already existed beyond Europe. David Washbrook and Prasannan Parthasarathi both connect British industrialisation to India’s prior centrality to the global production and exchange of textiles, for example. Similarly, the cultural forms of modern South Asian life, in the imperial age as much as now, are seen as being shaped by continuities which reach into the pre-imperial past as well as the response to forces from outside. Modernity, in this account, is not a single system but a complicated and inter-connected set of practices, mentalities and institutions that emerged at different places and different points in time.⁴

These competing revisions of modernity offer superb analyses of particular places and processes. They have allowed the proliferation of rich and complex stories which narrate how life in particular parts of the world has been shaped by interactions with phenomena elsewhere, on many different planes of analysis. The paradox is that the turn to a global history concerned to trace connections across continents has weakened the power of universal categories of analysis. Modernity has become a vague and fuzzy category, so supple it ends up being almost impossible to define. One sign of this is its frequent modification by a confusing and ill-defined proliferation of adjectives: alternative, multi, proto, early modernity and so on. Each of these new categories is an attempt to get to grips with the specificity of life in a particular place. Each, too, silently implies that a non-adjectival form of modernity exists in a pure and unmodified form. But that form is never clearly defined. Clear definitions are needed for scholars of different ages and places to

Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal, *Regional Modernities: The Cultural Politics of Development in India* (Stanford, CA, 2003).

⁴ David Washbrook, “The Global History of ‘Modernity’, A Response to a Reply,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41, 3 (1998), 299; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400-1750,” *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (1998), 75–104; D.A. Washbrook, “Eighteenth-Century Issues in South Asia,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44, no. 3 (2001), 372–83; C.A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1988); C.A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914* (Oxford, 2004).

have a comparative conversation with one another. Without them we are left with a set of arguments, even within South Asian history, unable to speak to one another, and instead have no way to construct a general narrative on a large scale about the recent human past.

This article is a thought experiment in the construction of a clear, singular concept of modernity which can survive the death of modernisation theory's unilinear Eurocentric narrative, but which does offer a framework for thinking about social change over the last four hundred years. It argues that a unitary concept of modernity is necessary to connect changes in one part of the world with those of another. The idea of modernity is only useful if it is defined in more or less the same way everywhere. But it suggests that such a concept only makes sense if it is used to describe a limited range of phenomena. In any place where something can be identified as modern, other, non-modern processes occurred which can't be described with the term. The concept of modernity can never describe the totality of any set of human phenomena. Modernity always exists, indeed relies on, non-modern forms of life. There can never be a people or society becoming fully modern. One can talk of certain practices and institutions as being modernised (the army, or the law, for example). But it makes no sense to talk about a teleological process of modernisation in general.

What does this singular, post-modernisation theory concept of modernity look like? In its most basic sense, modernity posits a ruptural relationship with time. Modernity is a concept which describes a self-conscious break with what went before, particularly with traditional forms of legitimation that occur in the practices of specific local environments. With their clean lines and abstract patterns, modern institutions aspire to generality and universality. Those creating modern institutions can, of course, try to assert the need to return to earlier, purer worlds; this was of course, the first meaning of the word revolution. But such a move is an attempt to find authority somewhere outside local practices of the immediate, recent past. In whatever form they take, modern institutions govern by trying to separate people from the particular worlds they inhabit in their own time. Modernity can only ever be limited and partial because individuals have no choice but to exist in the finite

circumstances of a particular temporal and spatial environment, which modern claims try to deny.⁵

To develop this argument, we need to be clear here about the kind of concept modernity is. First, contrary to many accounts, our concept is not primarily philosophical or concerned with the history of ideas. Our aim, indeed, is to separate intellectual history from the history of practical institutions, offering an account of modernity which focuses purely on the latter. Our purpose is to challenge the tendency for intellectual history to become a master discipline, capable of explaining what occurs in other, supposedly lesser sub-fields. Philosophically-minded scholars often refer to the thought of particular great thinkers to define the essential characteristics of modern ways of life. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Georg W. Hegel are common candidates. The effect to root the history of modernity in the work of a small number of thinkers is understandably attractive to intellectuals. But it poses unnecessary questions about how ideas are transmitted and put into operation, and presents modernity as something which has a pure form which exists in the minds of a few Europeans, in contrast to more complex derivative realities.⁶

Instead, the concept we propose is a tool for the empirical investigation of forms of practice. It describes how people do things rather than how they think about things. It is concerned in particular with how institutions are organised. Specifically, modernity consists of a set of practices and techniques which organise human interaction through abstract, de-personalised categories and generic forms. In place of face-to-face interaction and the particularities of local contest and obligation, modern institutions create anonymous systems which attempt to bring all transactions 'regardless of distance, into a single frame of analysis and action', as James Vernon puts it. Modernity's characteristic forms are the printed manual,

⁵ For a discussion of non-linear modern time see Faisal Devji, "Apologetic Modernity," *Modern Intellectual History* 4, 1 (2007), 61–76.

⁶ The best examples of this approach are Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA, 1992) and; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, 2007), 199. Taylor does not see ideas as causes, but does argue that social practices can be understood by examining the systematic beliefs they encapsulate. Works on South Asian history which understand western modernity through philosophy include the classic works Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ, 1993) and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

the Post Office, the bureaucratic form, the revenue survey, the legal code, the price series, the irrigation system, the globally-exchangeable commodity, the census, the ballot box. None of these can be explained better by reference to a coherent philosophical system. Each are tools, employed by individuals to achieve a variety of purposes, although they are part of a common effort to create some kind of systematic regularity in a world of dispersed and individualised conduct. Rather than being reduced to phenomena in other realms of activity – ideas or culture, for example - they need to be studied on their own terms.⁷

Second, our concept of modernity is epochal, in that there are periods of time when modern techniques and institutions proliferated more than others. One can certainly identify the moment when the effort to rule through abstract and de-personalised categories emerged in a particular place. One can also, in some places, identify the demise of such attempts. Modernity has a before: it may also have an after. One can perhaps talk about modern times, speaking of a period of time in which practices and institutions with modern characteristics particularly powerful and important, and perhaps also capture the elite and even public imagination. Yet it is wrong to consider modernity as defining everything about an era or age. Modern institutions are only ever one of many characteristics in a society at a given point in time. Even when modern forms extend into every sphere of activity, they exist alongside – indeed rely on – non-modern forms of life

Thirdly, modernity is a singular condition, but it had many different points of origin. On a large scale, modernity was produced by practices and institutions that emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and were concerned in particular with the government of distant strangers. Modern forms of rule were created by elites, in particular, in their attempt to exercise power over wide spaces, over large land masses and oceans. Modern practices emerge from multi-authored processes of pragmatic, local decision-making, not from revolutions in the world of ideas or the transformation of purely economic forces. Precisely because it is concerned to make things generic, repeatable and abstract, modern practices are

⁷ James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (University of California Press, 2014); Jon E Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers: Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780-1835* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

always produced iteratively, not by the command of a single intellectual centre or sovereign power.

Yet there is something about modernity that allows its denizens to imagine they are part of a system of power which might have had a single starting point, and single point of power. By reducing the particularity of local social phenomena to generic forms (converting use value into quantified exchange value, local juridical practices into textual law) modern practices enable those in the commanding heights of the modern state and capitalist economy to *imagine* that individuals are governable across large distances. Modern institutions work by creating the illusion of totality. It is, unfortunately, an illusion which too many scholars have been seduced by.⁸

In fact of course the abstract systems which modern institutions try to govern with (the price series or the legal code, for example) can never escape what Ashis Nandy calls 'the dirty imprint of life'. Modern institutions mildly alter some forms; they radically reshape others. But the dirt always clings on. Alongside abstract forms of rule, life within modern institutions is shaped by long-term ecological processes, by networks of market exchange which don't subjugate the traffic in goods to a single set of prices, by the forms of political obligation and affiliation which endure in institutions that rely on face-to-face contact, by family relations, by the affective states of individuals including pride, honour, their fear of humiliation and violence. The trajectory of none of these can be explained by a narrative concerned only with the theme of modernisation.⁹

It isn't simply that those who rule with modern institutions make over-ambitious claims about their own power. The argument here is that modern institutions are constituted by their very limitation. They create an illusion of order because they control only certain kinds of things, particularly those material processes that can be manipulated from a distance. Of course, for that illusion to work those who operate modern institutions need to claim an unrealistically broad vision. For example: to do their job, officials administering the permanent settlement in colonial India needed to imagine that every form of landed interest in India could

⁸ My account here is indebted, of course, to the argument about sovereignty and power in M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I, Introduction* (Harmondsworth, 1984).

⁹ Ashis Nandy, 'India: State, History and Self', *The Little Magazine* 1, no. 3 (2000), www.littlemag.com/.

be reduced to the category of 'zamindar'; or that the relationship between the state and landholder could be reduced to lines in revenue account books. Irrigation engineers needed to believe that a district's local economy could be controlled by a government-built series of waterworks. Most likely though, everyone knew that these claims were not true and understood implicitly real life was more complex.

Here, it isn't just that modernity, in India at least, is Janus-faced, as David Washbrook argues. It is constituted by a kind of double-think, in which its actors claim to wield a form of power they know they do not possess. Modern institutions can do little on their own; their very distance from the uneven fabric of everyday life means they rely on non-modern forms of life to exist and to act. Even the least locally embedded commodity, whose price is constituted by the abstract force of the global marketplace, has a use value in the specific life of a particular person; modernity did not create India's demand for cotton clothes, for example. Similarly, codes of law, revenue accounts, and numerical addressing systems treat people as abstract, inter-changeable categories; but they rely on forms of affective, inter-personal relations between people to operate. As we'll see in this article, modern practices spread and are supported by archaic forms of violence, relying on notions of honour and heroism that long precede their emergence. Similarly, charismatic leadership is not absent from modern institutions. Bureaucrats have friends too.

Finally, the point we need to emphasize here is that the concept of modernity is only meaningful if it is a limited, indeed attenuated category. To be useful, the idea of modernity needs to be restricted to those practices with which people try to rule with generic and abstract categories, and which mark a break with the continuities of the present and immediate past. A wider definition encompasses phenomena that can't be identified as peculiarly modern and in so doing would prevent modernity from being a stable analytical category.

That means that our definition excludes phenomena that many would identify as characteristic of the modern age, many forms of military violence, in particular the violence of conquest. Of course many aspects of war were modernised in Europe and elsewhere from the seventeenth century onwards. Armies began to be imagined as organisations which deployed generic and inter-changeable tools of violence, all at the disposal of a rational centre of command concerned to advance a dispassionately calculated set of interests. Yet both the causes and the real experience of war continued – indeed continues – to be dominated by non-modern

structures and attitudes. Archaic but long-lived ideas about heroism, respect and honour have often been vital to the decision to deploy force, and then in shaping how it is exercised, particular in imperial environments. We need to return to Joseph Schumpeter's argument that empires do not expand as the result of rational processes of acquisition. They develop by fusing modern techniques with affective impulses from earlier epochs, particularly with the irrational desire to display martial success for its own sake, in particular in situations where honour seemed to be under attack. Often, as we shall see in this article, imperial violence was driven by what Schumpeter called 'an atavism' of individual, psychological habits of emotional habits'.¹⁰

But our account of modernity's necessarily limited and attenuated character means though that we need to challenge the liberal teleology underpinning Schumpeter's argument. Schumpeter's story is another version of the totalising story of modernity's eventual future triumph. His use of the word 'atavism' implied that the archaic irrationality of imperial violence would be suppressed eventually by the peaceful power of modern liberal institutions. But atavism will always be with us. The particular forms of imperial violence which Schumpeter discussed may have disappeared, but other non-modern ways of life endure in an ever-changing relationship with modern practices which it is our task as historians to trace and understand. To reiterate, the limits of modernity are established by the character of modern institutions themselves: modernity is a concept which can only be used to describe practices which can be rendered abstract and general, and obviously many cannot take that form. It cannot dissolve 'all that is solid into thin air', as Marx put it, because in even the most 'modern' context life depends on practices that remain grounded in local and particular material life. The history of modernity's emergence is only ever a history of the partial domination of modern institutions in particular places at particular moments in time.

The history of modernity is then, to a large part the history of its own relationship with phenomena which cannot be assimilated by its own logic. The fate of modern institutions depends on precisely how they articulate their relationship with the relational, particular, contextual and visceral: with things and processes which

¹⁰ Joseph Schumpeter, "The Sociology of Imperialisms," in *Imperialism and Social Classes* (New York, NY, 1951), 65

cannot be generalised or translated into an abstract form. Perhaps – I don't have the space here to do more than assert a possibility – societies which 1950s sociologists once championed as having successfully modernised are those where modern techniques of rule were smoothly able to assimilate the non-modern ways of life it relied on. By contrast, the poverty and conflict of the imperial and post-imperial world emerged from a much more tense relationship between the two.

The remainder of this article is concerned with one such history. It traces the emergence of modern techniques of rule in the long-commercialised, now relatively prosperous region which surrounds the Godavari River delta at the centre of India's eastern, Andhra coastline. Practices introduced in the 1790s marked a rupture in the way social relations were organised. But, the introduction of modern institutions to Godavari depended on a range of archaic practices and social forms. As we'll see, the failure of British administrators to incorporate many of those forces placed their regime in crisis, and pushed the region into famine.

Coastal Andhra is one of the regions upon which David Washbrook began his research and has focused on throughout his career. The argument here draws heavily on Washbrook's sophisticated account of agrarian relations in 'wet' southern India. However, the argument also draws on Washbrook's approach to studying social change in South Asia, an approach one might characterise as anti-holistic. From 'Country Politics', to his more recent emphasis on the 'conditions making possible India's passage to its own distinctive modernity', Washbrook emphasises the existence of multiple orders of historical phenomenon. For him, ideas and political actions are important, but they are always articulated in social contexts that cannot be reduced to a single culture or set of beliefs. At the same time, there is no single social force which acts as a master category either, merely different layers of social practice which each move to rhythms of their own.¹¹

In the different phases of his work Washbrook has used this methodologically pluralist approach to challenge efforts to scholars to reduce complex historical phenomena to monolithic and holistic categories of analysis. Never willing to downplay the impact of empire, Washbrook has nonetheless consistently challenged the claim that imperialism is a concept which explains every aspect of

¹¹ David Washbrook, "Reviews," *History Workshop Journal* 38, 1 (1994), 256–58..

nineteenth or twentieth century South Asian society.¹² Similarly, his approach disaggregates the cultural totalities which more anthropologically-oriented scholars sometimes use to understand social change in South Asia. Against approaches which give explanatory power to holistic structures of representation, Edward Said's *Orientalism* for example, Washbrook is concerned with dispersed, contradictory and multi-layered systems of practice. If, later in his career, capitalism became his master concept, it is a 'system or process' that is 'inherently conflictual and changeful, incapable of realizing or of stabilizing itself', which 'operates through a wide variety of social relations of production and exploitation, which are themselves in constant transformation.'¹³

By contrast with a holistic, cultural approach to modernity, Washbrook's style reminds one of the work of Fernand Braudel, with its emphasis on things happening in different orders of historical time. 'Historical relations and developments' are 'multilateral' as Washbrook puts it in. 'History, like power, does not flow in only one direction'. Culture, political organisation, administrative institutions, systems of commodity exchange and ecology are all different kinds of phenomena that intersect but unfold on different timescales. It is, for example, worth noting that Washbrook was an early exponent of environmental history, an approach which presupposes the importance of long-term changes. But the significance of the physical environment does not detract from the connected but separate importance of political or economic institutions.

Applying Washbrook's approach to think about the concept of modernity, we can see that it only belongs to one particular sphere of human action: those techniques of governance which are capable of reducing social life to generic, material forms. Necessarily, modern institutions are built from and surrounded by pre-modern practices in contiguous spheres of activity, whether forms of economic exchange based on strong community identities, the skills and strong shared sentiments of scribal groups, forms of face-to-face sociability. Modern techniques of rule are an attempt to create a clear break with what went before; they mark a real rupture, but

¹² David Washbrook, "South India 1770-1840: The Colonial Transition," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, 3 (2004), 479-516; David Washbrook, "Economic Depression and the Making of 'Traditional' Society in Colonial India 1820-1855," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 3 (1993), 237-63

¹³ Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 1 (1992), 150.

a rupture in a limited sphere of activity. But even in its most extreme, accelerated form, it relies on non-modern forms of life that it can never annihilate. As Bruno Latour famously argued, ‘we have never been modern’.¹⁴

The Violent Beginning of Godavari’s New Regime

A part of the wealthy, ‘wet’, rice-exporting region of coastal Andhra, the region we are concerned with in this article covered the area around the last hundred miles before the Godavari river spills into the Bay of Bengal, halfway down the arc of coastline between Bengal and Cape Comorin. Godavari district (now divided between East and West Godavari) is a Telugu-speaking area ruled by the Qutb Shahi rulers Golconda kingdom from Hyderabad from the late sixteenth century onwards. Throughout most of the seventeenth century, the Golconda regime attracted and relied on a diverse group of warrior-aristocrats to keep order and collect revenue as *deshmukh* of each *pargana*. Some of these leaders were descendants of the Gajapati dynasty from Orissa, which briefly conquered the region but was then a source of elite migrants moving back and forth, enticed by the region’s productivity. Others were from local elite families who’d lived in coastal Andhra for centuries. All gave themselves themselves the status title Reddi, a word connoting a sense of leadership on a local scale.¹⁵

In other parts of India (Bengal and Arcot, for example), the dominance of warrior-aristocrats had been eclipsed by scribes and traders in the early eighteenth century. In Godavari they remained prominent until the British arrived. The conquest of Golconda in 1687 had brought Godavari under Mughal rule. But, by the time the Mughal regime turned to administering the region, the empire’s Deccan wars had depleted its resources. Emperor Aurangzeb sent *nawabs* to the region to pressure Godavari’s warrior-aristocrats to pay more in tax, but chiefs resisted and won. The result, as J. F. Richards suggests, was that power and money were conceded to ‘rebellious *sardars* and *rajas*’; the Mughals were forced to turn their warrior enemies into autonomous friends. Profiting from the Andhra coast’s links with regional and international trade and its rich ecology, these ‘newly

¹⁴ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Cynthia Talbot, *Precolonial India in Practice. Society, Region, and Identity in Medieval Andhra* (New York, 2001), 181–186.

emergent' leaders expanded their domains through a combination of local patronage and violence at the expense of other local centres of power.¹⁶

As the capacity of the central Mughal bureaucracy to command waned in the first half of the eighteenth century, the semi-autonomous chieftaincies of the Godavari region came under the rule of the increasingly autonomous Nizams of Hyderabad. In 1758, Godavari was one of the five northern districts belonging to the Nizam ceded to the English East India Company in return for British military support in war against the French and Marathas. Their transfer to the Company was confirmed by the *firman* given by the Emperor Shah Alam II to Robert Clive in 1765. Late eighteenth-century officials thought they were the only lands in India (apart from 'the zemindary of Benares') possessed by the British 'in free, avowed, undivided sovereignty'.¹⁷ The Company's initial interest in the region was built on pre-imperial networks of production and monetary circulation, particularly on the Company's effort to tap into textile production at the industrial town of nearby Machilipatam; on what I've suggest is misleadingly called India's 'proto-modernity'. The Company's limited power depended on its place in local networks of political allegiance and dependence, particularly on its exercise of the powers of regional sovereignty through the use of its army. But the initial thirty years of Company rule left the configuration of local politics at a sub-regional level undisturbed. Authority lay with a handful of fortified villages scattered throughout the district, where a handful of Reddi warrior-aristocrats held sway over a commercial society. In the early Company days these leaders paid tribute to *nawabs* who continued in position after the end of the Nizam's rule, and then to British revenue committees in either Machilipatam or Madras. In each case, chiefs periodically travelled to negotiate and pay at the centre of regional sovereign power, returning to manage land and cultivate their retinues with little interference.¹⁸

¹⁶ J.F. Richards, 'The Mughal Retreat from Coastal Andhra'; James Grant, 'Political Survey of the Northern Circars', December 20, 1784, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1812 (377), 690

¹⁷ G. J. Bryant, *The Emergence of British Power in India, 1600-1784* (Woodbridge, 2013), 201–210; James Grant, 'Political Survey of the Northern Circars', December 20, 1784, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1812 (377), 694

¹⁸ For a discussion of revenue systems in these years see John Sullivan, "Observations Respecting the Circar of Mazulipatam," 1780, IOR H/335, 1-47

Before 1793, Godavari's chiefs offered revenue in return for British armed support; violence was central to the relationship. For example, in the late 1780s leadership of the Polavaram estate on the south-west bank of the Godavari river was disputed amongst the three great grandchildren of the first chief. Polavaram was ruled by a family of Gajapati warlords who had migrated from Orissa in the seventeenth century. By the 1790s the dynasty had fractured, and Company officers in Machilipatam decided to back one of the sons, Mangapati Deo Reddi. This was a political decision, no different from the kind of choice which would have been made by the Company's Mughal and Nizamat predecessors as to which local notable to back in a succession struggle. The choice was based simply on the Company's belief that Mangapati was the man best able to secure them a stable source of revenue. The 'zamindar' struck a deal in which he would pay revenue in exchange for receiving the Company's help against the rival claims of his siblings and his mother. East India Company troops were sent from the neighbouring fort of Ellore. Polavaram's inhabitants were directed to obey Mangapati, or else 'be considered as traitors and rebels'. For a few years the deal stuck.¹⁹

Historians of seventeenth and eighteenth century South Asia, David Washbrook included, sometimes describe the social and political world which the East India Company encountered in the first years of its expansion in India as 'proto-modern'. India – and coastal Andhra was no exception - before the British empire possessed a complex commercial society, in which high levels of literacy existed alongside political formations able to nurture market transactions on a large scale. A trading gentry, a scribal-bureaucratic elite, and a vibrant world of commodity exchange emerged in the quarter millennium before invasion Europe transformed the pattern of Indian politics. And, clearly, British imperial power relied on social elites and commercial relationships which preceded conquest.²⁰

Yet, phrases such as 'proto-modern', even perhaps 'early modern' imply a genealogical connection between pre-imperial and imperial forms of rule. They also down-play the contribution made by scholars of this period to our understanding of

¹⁹ Mallikarjuna Rao, "Native Revolts in the West Godavari District, 1785-1805" (PhD, Andhra University, 2000), 128; Grant, "Political Survey of the Northern Circars," 664.

²⁰ For example, in David Washbrook, "South India 1770–1840: The Colonial Transition," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 03 (July 2004): 479–516, doi:10.1017/S0026749X03001197.

the distinctiveness of seventeenth and early eighteenth century Indian commerce and politics. Instead of being seen merely as the pre-history of the modern proper, we need to trace the prosperity and political order of the period in its own terms. We've argued that only a limited concept of modernity, as the attempt to govern with abstract and general categories, allows it to be defined clearly enough to have practical use in historical scholarship. Assessed on the basis of that concept, was nothing modern about how the way the Mughals exercised power.

We need, in other words, to understand Mughal India as different from British India without defining it as incompletely presaging the latter. Perhaps the most important marker of difference was the relationship between money and accounting categories, and local practice. Monetization is often seen as the classic instance of modernization, as it seems to impose values from outside particular social worlds. However in India before British rule, money and writing connected but did not subordinate distinctive worlds of identity and social practice. Perhaps the most important sign of this was the existence of different currencies, and multiple weights and measurements in areas theoretically ruled by a single sovereign. In Andhra, gold coins from the Vijayanagara empire circulated throughout territory ruled by the neighbouring rival Deccan sultanates, even after the former's collapse. Land and revenue rights were bought and sold, but there was no idea of a single price extending across time and space.²¹ As Frank Perlin argued, forms of accounting and record-keeping were used to link rather than subordinate different social orders. Early modern India 'lacked' practices of governance that attempted to rule difference by dominating it with homogenous and depersonalised norms. If the modern state and capitalist economy rely on the subordination of social life on such abstract forms – the spread of the modern state's modular knowledge or capitalist property relations – early modern India possessed neither. Yet these absences did not preclude relative prosperity. Living standards in early eighteenth century India were not significantly lower than those in Europe. Perhaps we need to revise our account of the institutional preconditions of economic growth.²²

²¹ Phillip B. Wagoner, "Money Use in the Deccan, C. 1350–1687: The Role of Vijayanagara Hons in the Bahmani Currency System," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 51, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 457–80

²² Frank Perlin, "Growth of Money Economy and Some Questions of Transitions in Late Pre-Colonial India," *Social Scientist* 11, 10 (1983): 27–38; Frank Perlin, "State Formation Reconsidered: Part Two," *Modern Asian Studies* 19, 3 (1985): 415–80.

The point is that the Mughals and their contemporaries possessed a political culture that valued and nurtured the skill of managing difference without annihilating particularity and distinction. Indeed, as a number of historians have argued, the preservation of distinction, and the maintenance of a balance between different interests and communities was perhaps the dominant Mughal ethos.²³ This was a world of networks not systems, of ‘connected histories’ in which the place of the intermediary and the broker were critical. It was, particularly, a political culture which continued to value face-to-face contact and physical proximity. These networks were linked by nodal points, military camps, religious centres, *darbars*, *kachcharis*, in which dispersed individuals gathered to come into the ‘presence’ of one another for short or long periods of time, and sovereigns were able to meet their subjects. They allowed the construction of powerful effective polities, able to integrate most of the Indian subcontinent into their usually accommodating systems of power. Yet, they relied on a way of doing politics dramatically different from modern techniques of rule concerned to impose abstract and general categories on the complexities of reality.

To some extent, more or less in different places, the East India Company’s growth in the third quarter of the eighteenth century relied on their ability to operate within this sophisticated but non-modern political culture of movement and negotiation. In Godavari, the symbiotic relationship between landholders like Mangapatti Deo Reddi and the Company depended on travel, physical proximity and negotiation between the landholder and British officers at Macchilipatam. But within a short space of time, the British began to think this style of political alliance-making was not regularly remunerative enough to sustain their power. The Company’s failure to extract resources from the northern sarkars overlapped with war and fiscal crisis throughout the Company’s South Asian territories, which themselves overlapped with the broader political and moral crisis of empire that accompanied the loss of the thirteen North American colonies. Anxieties about the security of the Company’s possessions caused the London-based Court of Directors to direct the Committee of Circuit to tour the northern sarkars in 1776, investigating

²³ Nandini Chatterjee, “Reflections on Religious Difference and Permissive Inclusion in Mughal Law,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 29, 03 (2014): 396–415, doi:10.1017/jlr.2014.20; Muzaffar. Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200-1800* (London, 2004); Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptations of Violence* (London, 2012).

and tabulate 'the state' of the region including the number of inhabitants, state of manufactures, revenue, land rights and fortification. This was a sufficient change of political style to cause one member, George Mackay, to resign.²⁴

The 1776 inquiry was intended to create a body of knowledge that would allow the Company to offer a series of 'fixed' and regular 'leases' to landholders, guaranteeing the Company's stability and income. Eventually, after debate and political turmoil, the Company decided to create a series of fixed revenue settlements with landholders, following the decision made in Bengal in 1789 with a similar move in the northern sarkars in 1793. The settlements were declared permanent in 1793 and 1801 respectively.²⁵

In both Bengal and the permanently-settled south, the new regime was supposed to reduce the give and take governing the interaction between the Company and its subjects. Instead, the relationship with local leaders was converted into a series of fixed financial transactions, regulated by the flow of paper between the Collector's office and the Board of Revenue in Madras. The Mughal idioms which the Company unwittingly operated depended on governors making political judgements about who was likely to uphold their power and who was not. British officers supported Mangapati because they thought he was more likely to support the Company's regime than his siblings. The new system removed the need to make judgements about friends and enemies. British officers no longer needed to take sides in local disputes. They merely to impartially administer fixed, written processes. The need for movement was eliminated too. Instead of being governed by an occasionally travelling committee based at the region's administrative centre, the Company's power was channelled through individual officers dispersed throughout the northern sarkar's second tier of towns. On the Godavari river delta, a district Collector arrived with a small retinue of Indian officers and remains of stationary and regulations in 1799, marking both the imposition of bureaucratic power and the retreat of the Company from being a political protagonist in Godavari's local society.

²⁴ Letter from Court of Directors, 12 April 1775 and Fort St George, Revenue Consultations, 28 June 1776, *Second Report from the Committee of Secrecy* 27 June 1781, 319-324

²⁵ Report from the Board of Revenue, Madras, 15 April 1792, IOR H/366, pp.405-520; Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*; Wilson, *The Domination of Strangers*.

Instead of being political subjects with whom the Company could negotiate, the Company's new revenue-collecting system redefined landholders collecting as a sources of revenue and the possessor of a physical asset. They were treated as neither friends nor enemies; they were merely a static line in British ledger books, which the Board of Revenue in Madras imagined could be manipulated from a distance. So, for example, when in 1799 floods diminished the productive capacity of the Polavaram realm, the Mangapatti Deo Reddy's plea to remit the payment of revenue was quickly dismissed by the Board of Revenue in Madras. The new rules insisted that landholders who didn't pay revenue promptly to the Company would have their landed assets sequestrated and sold; replacing the name of a non-paying landholder with another in the Madras government's revenue accounts. The role of the Collector was simply to execute instructions from far off.

Benjamin Branfill, the first Collector of Godavari district, was a member of a major London mercantile family which was making the transition from trade to the imperial bureaucracy.²⁶ But Branfill wasn't imbued with the ethos of distant, abstract regularity which governed the Company's new techniques of rule. In fact, his own attitude to political power clashed with the assumptions made by his superiors in Madras. He was keen to have some kind of standing in local society. He was interested in protecting his honour, using force to do so if need be. His language betrayed a strong sense of the legitimacy in late eighteenth-century imperial politics of an emotional, passionate response to local situations, in contrast to the cold regularity of the Board of Revenue. If Branfill was Godavari's agent of modernization, he was not himself modern.²⁷

As a consequence, when faced with Mangapati's refusal to pay revenue Branfill's actions were vacillating and contradictory, stressing the need to conciliate one moment and violently dispossess him the next. In December 1798, Branfill seemed sympathetic to the landholder, arguing that the Company should 'indulge' him; the problem lay with Mangapati's 'adherents', not his own attitude. Between March

²⁶ For details of the family history see William Holman to Champion Branfill, November 1720, Essex County Office Archives, D/Y1/1/34/1;

²⁷ For the importance of the district officer's reputation, see James Lees, "A 'Tranquil Spectator': The District Official and the Practice of Local Government in Late Eighteenth-Century Bengal," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 1–19

and July the following year Branfill adopted a more aggressive stance. Captain Denton from the Madras army was sent to mediate, with little effect; ‘unless drastic action is taken against his contumacy the revenue of the Company will suffer greatly’, the Collector argued. But then, on 24 July, Branfill again urged a more conciliatory attitude, suggesting that the Board of Revenue in Madras agree Mangapati’s proposal to reduce the tax he paid on teak wood-cutting. Branfill’s approach was governed by the threat Mangapati presented at any point in time, compared to the number of Company troops in the area. He was most conciliatory after the landholder had arrested and imprisoned one of the Company’s Indian revenue officials. He was most aggressive when Company troops were present in the district.

The end of war between the East India Company and the state of Mysore freed troops who could be deployed to impose British power over Godavari’s recalcitrant zamindars. There was nothing systematic about their use. Following the fall of Sriringapatam in May 1799 and its short, violent aftermath, a battalion of the Bengal Marine marched through Godavari in March 1800 on its way back home, and Branfill persuaded their commanding officer to deploy them against Mangapati. Paranoid as ever, Branfill ‘was unwilling that they should advance too rapidly, lest their approach would alarm the zemindars of Polavaram’, and allow them to collect their own armed retainers and fight the British. Mangapati did learn about the impending attack, but fled, to the nearby Papi hills, instead of fighting.²⁸

Even though the source of danger had been removed, Branfill’s sense of honour dictated that a battle take place, and Mangapati be defeated by force. So, he ordered soldiers to set off in chase. When Mangapati couldn’t be found, the Company’s troops sought targets in the plains, engaging in a frenetic effort to destroy the Raja’s power there. Branfill idea of sovereignty was only be satisfied if the violent power of British sovereignty in a spectacular fashion. He wrote to Madras asking for permission to execute rebels on the spot. His request was turned down. Nonetheless, the houses of supporters on the plains were burnt down and Mangapati’s allies rounded up. In one incident, a Brahmin who had ‘intrigued with’

²⁸ Collector of Rajahmundry, Letter to Col. Vigor, 31 March 1800 and Letter to Lt. Col Gardiner, 5 April 1800, Godavari D[istrict] R[ecords], Andhra Pradesh State Archives, vol.856, pp.

the landholder was pushed into a boat full of his social inferiors, and felt so humiliated by failure to recognise his status he committed suicide.²⁹

Branfill's cathartic violence may have helped British power endure through fear in Godavari, but it also ended the Collector's own career. The incoming Governor of Madras conducted an inquiry into the Polavaram crisis and found that marching soldiers into the hills was an action 'to the destruction of the health of the soldiers and to the degradation in the eyes of the inhabitants of a military reputation'. The Company's policy, Lord William Bentinck said, should always be 'to reclaim by gentle methods', and be careful of 'the religious prejudices' and 'ordinary customs and manners' of 'the natives'. Branfill's anxious, violent response to the limitations of modernity in Godavari led him to be investigated in London. Frustrated by the attack on his reputation, he quit before he was sacked, and returned to Britain.³⁰

These statements nicely illustrate the doublethink, the hypocrisy if you like, which the effort to reduce landholding to a homogenous system of modern rules involved. The Company's system created an illusion of order in Madras, based on the transmission of revenue rules and the letter's about the smooth functioning of the new Collector's office in Rajahmundry. Yet those institutions were unable to sustain the new order without being supplemented by forces operating according to a very different logic, particularly by the punitive violence unleashed by Branfill. Branfill behaved as a frightened warrior not as a modern revenue officer; but then the rules which framed the permanent settlement outlined no procedure to be followed when landholders with large bodies of armed retainers refused to obey the Company's orders. Modernity could only be introduced to Godavari as a graft onto spectacularly un-modern forms of authority and power.

One consequence, then, of the effort to control rural Godavari by reducing social action to systematic, written bureaucratic practices was the escalation, but also delegitimisation, of local violence. Force, and violent disorder, were pushed to the fringes of zones supposedly regulated by systematic rules. In Rajahmundry, as the new governmental approach worked its way out in different ecological zones, that

²⁹ Collector of Rajahmundry to Board of Revenue, 27 October 1800, Godavari DR, 934, pp.45-6; Instructions to Lt-Colonel Campbell, 26 January 1802, Godavari DR vol., 940, pp.199-224 and 253-5

³⁰ Madras Public Despatch, 27 June 1804, IOR E/4/892, p.571

involved the creation of a stark distinction between the rice-cultivating lowland and the heavily wooded Papi hills. Before the permanent settlement, these highlands were part of landed estates which straddled plains and hills. They were a source of teak and military personnel, as hill-dwellers provided armed retinues for the plains Rajas, recruited through hill chiefs. The management of their relationship with the hills was central to warrior-aristocrats like Mangapati Deo's local leadership. The men who took their place trying to govern rural Godavari's social relationships failed to establish the kind of political authority able to incorporate leaders who the British described as 'hill rajas'. The result was a process of effective partition and retreat, as the hills were abandoned to what the British saw as savagery and disorder until a more interventionist forestry policy emerged in the late nineteenth century.

Friendless Bureaucrats

The modernisation of Godavari's political institutions saw the quick fall of its peasant-warrior dynasties, and the rise in their place of a local elite whose power was based on employment by the East India Company. The dominant ethos of local leadership moved away from the martial charisma of the warrior to the pacific virtues of the trader and scribe. Brahmins thrived, in particular, who could rely on hereditary skills cultivated through generations as accountants, scribes and record-keepers. These groups managed record rooms and collected revenue; they also took over landed estates when warrior lords were dispossessed by the new British rules. The process of change in the early years of Company rule saw the rise of the same scribal social groups who became more important in many parts of India during the eighteenth century before the British rise: scribal and mercantile men, often Brahman, Kayastha or Khatri, had displaced warrior elites in Maratha territories, in Bengal and in Arcot.³¹ The difference, however, was that the rise of pacific, scribal social groups to positions of leadership was accompanied by a vehement critique from precisely the British officials who relied so strongly upon them. According to Company servants at the time and scholars since, Godavari's

³¹ Stewart Gordon, *The Marathas 1600-1818* (Cambridge, 1993); David L. Curley, "Kings and Commerce on an Agrarian Frontier: Kalketu's Story in Mukunda's Candimangal," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 38, 3 (2001): 299-324; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Trade and Politics in the Arcot Nizamat (1700-1732)," in *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York, NY, 2012).

passage into modernity was marked by the failure of this group to conform to modern standards required by employees of public authority. Instead, according to these accounts, they retained greater loyalty to local interests than to the norms of the modern state and thus allowed 'corruption' to be rife. As a British officer writing from the neighbouring district wrote in the 1850s, 'in every district ... the whole body of public servants form a combination, bound together by strong ties of interest ... to maintain abuses'.³²

The most common explanation emphasises the cultural gap between local Indian ways of doing politics and the East India Company's regime, stressing the partial, incomplete and limited power of the latter. R.E Frykenberg saw the persistence of local interests as a sign of the failure of the centralised imperial state to sufficiently modernise India. Frykenberg was writing in the hey-day of state-led development in the 1960s. He had, after all, worked as a research assistant for Albert Mayer, the architect tasked by Jawarharlal Nehru to develop a system of 'village planning' to transform rural India.³³ In his work on Guntur district he argued that that combinations of Deshastha Brahmans in the neighbouring district to Godavari acted as a destabilising 'anti-state' force which 'disperses its power and proliferates itself to the detriment of the State'. With a less celebratory account of the possibilities of modern state power, Ranajit Guha and other subalternists argue the persistence of localism is a sign of the British regime's dominance without hegemony; its success in materially subjugating India without sharing its ruling norms and ideologies.³⁴ Similarly, the political scientist Sudipta Kaviraj drew a contrast with between the centralising, rationalist force of the western state and the local vernacular idioms the British were forced to concede to. Like Frykenberg and Guha, Kaviraj notes 'the self-limiting impulses of the colonial state', arguing that unlike European absolutist states, colonial rule was incapable of dissolving all competing claims to political authority, or condensing all the functions of social and political regulation into the institution of the state. The 'colossal structures of colonial 'rationalism' had

³² Robert Eric Frykenberg, "Traditional Processes of Power in South India: An Historical Analysis of Local Influence," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 1, 2 (1963): 136.

³³ Albert Mayer, *Pilot Project, India: The Story of Rural Development at Etawah, Uttar Pradesh* (Berkeley, CA, 1958), xvii.

³⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

feet of vernacular clay’, as Kaviraj famously puts it.³⁵

These different analyses ignore the extent to which *all* regimes in the ‘modern’ west as much as imperial or post-imperial India, need local agents who build their own authority separately from the machinery of central power. Any central bureaucracy can only govern so much. Central political authorities rely on the coordinated actions of groups of people they cannot directly control and who seek legitimacy from ‘local’ sources as well as their connection to the central sovereign. Those actions take different forms. Sometimes, they exist in legally constituted spheres of local administration to which power is devolved, as in the federal United States or nineteenth-century British counties and boroughs. Even in supposedly centralised Napoleonic Europe, government worked through elected local officials and councils. Until the late nineteenth-century, France was a nation of dispersed peasants with powerful ‘centrifugal’ forces into. Key to modern government in most places was the fusing of property-ownership and administrative or political office at a local level; in England, until the late nineteenth century most of the functions of the state were carried out by local landowners acting as Justice of the Peace, or members of an increasing numbers of local boards. We forget how small the institutions of the nineteenth-century central state were; and how crucial to its operation was the public recognition, often even the active cultivation of forms of local leadership which had autonomous lives of their own.³⁶

Late eighteenth or early nineteenth century India was peculiar not, then, because of its central British state created a ‘minimal order’, and adopted a policy of ‘studied non-interference in the social institutions of the country’. It was different from Europe because it failed to publically and actively enlist social forces outside the very narrow confines of state administration in governing society. British-ruled India was remarkable for the near total absence of any strata of local government until the late nineteenth-century, for example. It was only in 1919 that the leaders of municipal and district boards were elected by any kind of popular vote. Even in the permanently settled lands of Bengal and Andhra, the

³⁵ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the Crisis of Political Institutions in India,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 18, 2 (1984): 227, 232

³⁶ Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976); Jim Bulpitt, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom: An Interpretation* (Manchester, 1983).

political authority of landholders was challenged and curtailed during the early nineteenth century. The British frowned on the fusion of property-holding and governmental office which was vital for local political power elsewhere. As many historians have recognised, government relied on the British working with local Indian agents, of course. But the British regime was reluctant to formally acknowledge the role of local leaders in the imperial constitution.

The result was that, in Godavari at least, the only route to local political authority came by working in the Company's offices. Rather than seeing Indian officials simply as manipulative schemers using their official position for private gain, the argument here is that they were trying to use the full range of their connections to build a position of local leadership. They were, in other words, concerned with status and authority not just cash. But the British even disavowed any political connection with their own 'native' officers, regarding them as no more than functionaries whose task was to mechanically obey rules and commands. In practice, their failure to construct an effective alliance with indigenous elites dramatically limited the scope of state power. The result was that the forms of local authority needed for the government to work atrophied; with them, the prosperity of the local economy collapsed.

We can trace this process by looking at the careers of two officials. First, Jaggaya Kocherlakota, a locally-born Telegu officer who worked for both the East India Company and the Polavaram Rajas collecting revenue and marshalling armed men. Jaggaya had been Branfill's most trusted official and confidant. He was a vital source of information about local society when the Collector first arrived to the district. Branfill was accused by his superiors in Madras of letting his partiality for Jaggaya cloud his judgement during the conflict. It was Jaggaya who reconnoitred Polavaram fort, and then directed troops during the British army's attack and chase into the hills.

After Mangapati Reddy had been driven to the hills by Benjamin Branfill's army, Polavaram passed quickly from one landholder to another. No-one was able to get sufficient grip on local agrarian resources to pay revenue consistently to the Company, until Jaggaya bought it in 1813. Jaggaya paid Rs 43,210, 'money [that] was certainly made somewhat too rapidly' to have been made by the rules,

according to a British officer. But unlike his predecessor, Jaggaya had not have the money or skill to impose his authority on the local countryside. The Company's refusal to negotiate about how much revenue was paid each year, and its effort to limit the landholder's capacity to give revenue-free grants of land curtailed Jaggaya's capacity to build authority through patronage. Jaggaya tried to enlist support by building temples on the plains of Godavari. But, in the two decades in which he retained control of the estate, its size and influence shrank. Jaggaya's position was continually resisted by one-time subjects of Polavaram living in the hills. After a brief effort to control the hill-tracts themselves, the upland regions of Godavari were written-off by the British as a realm of un-disciplined wildness, until more aggressive forestry policies arrived in the late nineteenth century. With no funding for irrigation work and little money advanced to cultivators during difficult economic times, Jaggaya's lands became less productive. Nonetheless, the new Raja, as he styled himself, lived on in until old age.³⁷

Jaggaya's career shows that district officers could not help but rely on existing networks of local officers and landholders to collect taxes and maintain some kind of local order. But, this reliance was intermittent, and was constantly disavowed. Much of the time, local leaders were trying to be clients of a British regime which did not want to act as a patron. They were also trying to project a quasi-autonomous public role in a world where the British thought the Company's bureaucracy was the only legitimate authority.

The career of a second officer illustrates this latter point. Singari Venkataram Paupiah was a scribe and translator from a relatively low-born Telugu Brahmin family. By the 1790s he'd climbed his way to being the officer in charge of the East India Company's relationship with the estate of an estate ruled by another family of Andhra warrior-aristocrats, Mugalturru, on the right bank of the Godavari river near the coast. As *darogah* of the Company's *kachchhari* at Mugalturru, Paupiah presented himself as a rigorous and 'severe' collector of revenue, an efficient agent of the bureaucratic logic of British imperial collection. Yet a bureaucratic position

³⁷ N.W. Kindersley, Collector, to Board of Revenue with Attachments, 13 May 1824, AP State Archives, Godavari District, 1824, no.4638, 132-7

involved public authority too; Paupiah attempted to exercise power by building local relationships and exercising patronage.

At its height, the Mugalturru estate was said to have 2-3000 dependents, and an ‘open choultry’, where rice was distributed daily to all travellers.³⁸ But the old warrior-aristocrats of Mugalturru were dispossessed in similar circumstances as their neighbours at Polavaram. As the East India Company’s rigid new revenue settlement came into force, Boppiah Tirupati Raju, the lord of Mugalturru, pleaded with British officers to treat him as the friend he imagined he had been to the Company for the previous 20 years, and to remit revenue. The Company refused. Boppiah’s delayed revenue payments caused the dispossession of his estate. Like his neighbour at Polavaram, the Raja of Mugalturru fled to the nearby hills with a band of supporters, quickly to die in exile. The Company took over administration of the estate, appointing Paupiah acting as manager and chief revenue collector.

With Mugalturru divided and no patriarch, Paupiah tried to fill the vacuum and impose his own authority on the neighbourhood. But Boppiah’s three widows challenged his role, trying to assert their own public power over the estate. In a stream of letters to the Collector, John Reid, they accused Boppiah of embezzlement, and also of ‘venting his malignity upon those who had the misfortune to offend him or did not know the road to his friendship’. His greatest crime though, was to publically assert his status, ‘putting himself on a footing of equality with [the Raja’s wives] by eating with them’.³⁹

A long tradition of writing described this kind of conduct as the typically nefarious actions of an Indian official taking advantage of the weakness of the British regime for their own private gain. The early nineteenth century novelist Sir Walter Scott, castigated a man like Paupiah as ‘[t]he artful Hindu, master counsellor of dark projects, an Oriental Machiavelli, whose premature wrinkles were the result of many intrigues, without scruples, to attain political or private

³⁸ Grant, “Political Survey of the Northern Circars,” 664.

³⁹ John Reid, Collector, to Board of Revenue, 18 October 1799, 13 November 1799 and 24 June 1800, and John Reid, Collector to Captain Bowness, 18 December 1799, Godavari DR, no.854, 92, 141-5, 227-240, 176

advantage.’ Scott’s friend David Haliburton had been ousted from Madras by a plot involving a relative of Paupiah.⁴⁰

Yet this critique, which continues to this day, fails to recognise the often public-facing actions of supposedly corrupt local officers. Men such as Jaggaya and Paupiah were not engaged in purely private intrigue for personal gain; they were trying to build local forms of political power, no doubt for their own egotistic reasons but satisfaction came from something more than the accumulation of money. Their actions were not hidden away beyond closed doors. They took place in public. Paupiah publically pushed himself forward as an equal of the Mugalturru widows, visibly eating with the family. His financial transactions with the estate’s tenants took place in a public situation. Paupiah claimed his allowance from the East India Company wasn’t enough to live off on (certainly not at the status he claimed), so he needed ‘to live off the countryside’. To raise money, Paupiah had ‘a ceremony at his house’. As the Collector, John Reid noted, ‘the custom of giving presents and even asking them on occasions is universal’. Paupiah’s only ‘deviation’ from custom was to name the sum he expected from each renter. Reid didn’t have a good enough grip on the estate’s accounts to work out how much Paupiah had gained: ‘so artfully he has conducted himself, that ‘scarcely any charge can be brought home to him’, ‘much must be left to conjecture’. Nonetheless, at one event he reported that Paupiah gained 500 pagodas, none of which was paid in secret but publically handed over by his subjects or tenant. Strikingly, none of those who paid were amongst the petitioners who complained against the diwan. Paupiah’s friendship was something Mugalturru’s renters thought was worth paying for. Instead, allies of the Mugalturru widows reported him to the Collector.

Paupiah did not see the authority he was building in these ‘ceremonies’ as a challenge to British power. Paupiah’s power partly relied on his connection to the Collector to buttress his own independent authority. When he arrived to the district, the Collector complained that Paupiah ‘immediately gave it out that I should be his friend (altho’ I have never seen him) and that he should soon get the better of his enemies’. Reid, however, disavowed the connection, presenting himself as a neutral

⁴⁰ Sir Walter Scott, *The Complete Works of Sir Walter Scott: With a Biography, and His Last Additions and Illustrations* (Conner & Cooke, 1833), V, 44; R.E. Frykenberg, “Village Strength in South India,” in *Land Control and Social Structure* (Madison, WI, 1969), 246; R.E. Frykenberg, *Guntur District, 1788-1848. A History of Local Influence and Central Authority in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 231–248.

figure with no commitment to one side or another in Godavari's society. The Collector insisted to the widow's agent that he 'was by no means a friend of Paupiahs, and that he would find me ready and willing to make an impartial investigation into the different charges' against him.

In the chaotic political conditions which followed the permanent settlement in Godavari, Paupiah's aim was to create a sort of local Anglo-Indian regime. His polity was based on his management of local patronage downwards and an upward connection with the Company's higher authority; perhaps the latter was rooted still in the idea of the Company as the Mughal representative in the region, perhaps simply in British military force. The construction of this new kind of political organisation, for Paupiah, depended on alliance-building, on friendship as well as both violence and bureaucratic rule. By contrast, the British representative in the district anxiously asserted his desire to treat everyone as a stranger: to govern individuals as members of generic, abstract categories. British officers emphatically disavowed the idea that power depended on friendship and alliance-building. For John Reid and his colleagues, political power relied on the cold modern logic of bureaucratic authority alone.

A similar disavowal characterised British rule throughout the permanently settled districts of India for the next fifty years, from Bengal to the southern fringes of the northern sarkars. It was a disavowal that had a number of consequences. First of all, the denial of relational commitments with Indians gave the British a sort of strategic openness. The British evasion of friendship allowed them to appear all things to all people, and them to avoid a negative response from enemies of allies. John Reid's disavowal of any friendship with Paupiah blocked opposition from Paupiah's enemies to the Company's fairly fragile authority in the district. Evading commitment, constantly deferring the moment at which they needed to come down on one side or the other, was a way for the British to maintain their position and retain some kind of grip on power.

Yet, that evasion also meant their attempt to actually get anything done was limited. The price of the East India Company's strategic openness was its limited reach into the Indian countryside. With no allies, the Company found revenue collection difficult, and staggered from one fiscal crisis to another. It was unable to limit violence any more than was needed to prevent its own limited, core administrative functions from being attacked. By all accounts, the early nineteenth

century in the permanently settled districts was a period of crime, dacoity and endemic violence. The Company's persistent refusal to take sides in local battles meant disputes lingered and conflict was unresolved. The British regime did no more than respond to events in a chaotic and *ad hoc* fashion.

Paupiah's own story ended in failure. His jerry-built authority quickly vanished, and others took his place in the chaotic carousel of local power which characterised the first thirty years of life in the Godavari region after the permanent settlement. Paupiah fell for the simple reason this his enemies were better organised than he was. Petitions against him arrived at the Company's *kachchhari* towards the end of 1799. At the point, John Reid's reassurance that he was 'willing to make an impartial investigation into the different charges' was disingenuous. Paupiah was too vital a component of the local administrative regime to be brought down by a few accusations of corruption; and the consequences of an investigation too dramatic. The first petitioner, a renter named Gotaty Subiah, had called for the collection of rent to be suspended while an inquiry into the accounts of villages in Mugalturru was made. Such a move would have created too great a loss in the Company's revenue. Considering the short term interests of the Company, John Reid decided to dismiss the charge, arresting the petitioner for making unsubstantiated allegations. But the campaign against Paupiah picked up, with the widows and their agent getting involved. Reid was evasive, refusing to give 'a definite opinion about the individuals' to the Board of Revenue, blaming his own ignorance of the area he had been posted to rule. Eventually the agitation of significant numbers of renters in Mugalturru, as well as the ruling family made some kind of action necessary to maintain peace and the Company's finances. By the beginning of 1800, Paupiah had become so worried about his personal safety 'he was afraid to sleep, two nights in the same room'. Eventually Reid responded to pressure from the Mugalturru widows and their allies, and Paupiah was arrested and sacked from his post. But the Mugalturru widows didn't win their battle for power either. Within a short space of time, the estate was dismembered and sold, too.⁴¹

The Collapse of Political Leadership and Economic Decline

⁴¹ John Reid, Collector, to Board of Revenue, 24 January 1800, Godavari DR, no.854, p.254, AP State Archives

Modernity arrived in Godavari as the negotiated political relationships between governors and local power-brokers were reduced to a set fixed and non-negotiable contract between the East India Company's supposedly unitary government and propertied subjects. That story is a very familiar one. But the usual narrative forgets the extent to which modern governments usually incorporate and rely on non-modern forms of affiliation and practice. The peculiarity of modern government in early nineteenth-century India was the emphatic way these archaic elements were disavowed and suppressed compared to other contemporary societies.

Modern governance consists of the effort to rule strangers with generalities and abstractions. But I've suggested that patron-client relations, the cultivation of local political followings through charismatic leadership, the assertion of power based on status and community rather than rational interest or national-sentiment, all remain vital to the way in which modern states are organised throughout the globe, to the supposedly 'developed' west as much as supposedly 'developing' world. The unwillingness of the East India Company's regime to stitch together its ruptural and abstract techniques of rule with practices rooted in local familiarity caused the region's social breakdown. The events we've described in this chapter were followed by an economic crisis. The argument here is that this crisis was caused by the East India Company's effort to impose a modern structure of rule, based purely on the manipulation of abstractly conceived entities, without creating an alliance with the non-modern social forces which preceded its arrival in southern Indian society.

One sign of this collapse was the demise of institutions able to offer physical protection, and with it an increase in Godavari's vulnerability to outside attack. Before the permanent settlement, the authority of the region's warrior-aristocrats relied on their occasional use of force, and their capacity to call in assistance from allies higher in the political hierarchy, including the East India Company. In the early 1800s the armed forces which had been kept by the region's old warriors were dispersed. The Company had only a small retinue of locally-based troops. During these years, the Company's conquest of central India severed the bonds which connected groups of armed men to political formations, particularly to Maratha states. The destruction of the financial and affective bonds which bound warrior communities together allowed more disorganised violence to proliferate. In March 1816, groups of *pindari* horsemen with a loose connection to insurgent Maratha

states rode through the region to plunder. The collapse of Godavari's political structures meant there were not enough organised armed men to defend the region. The 130 soldiers on duty in Rajahmundry were enough to defend the town's tiny British population, but no more. To protect themselves, well-to-do Indian residents of the town and surrounding areas fled temporarily to the hills.⁴²

Similarly, the newly fissile and weak leadership provided by regional landholders failed to keep the physical infrastructure that maintained the productivity of the local economy functioning, most importantly to regulate the flow of water. Until the early nineteenth century, the prosperity of the region was maintained by a decentralised network of canals that channelled water flowed through the River Godavari into rice-fields. Embankments stopped excess water from destroying crops; waterways directed water to sustain the growth of paddy. These were managed by local warrior-chiefs, as part of their attempt to maintain a local population which could fight if need be. But the collapse of chieftaincies by the mid-1820s meant that support for infrastructure had collapsed. Reports written by British officials in 1844 and then 1852 criticised the ruinous state of irrigation works. Works had 'not been kept in an effective state'. Irrigation channels were so full of reeds water only flowed during the very highest floods.⁴³

The decline of pre-imperial structures of local leadership caused a collapse in the region's human and physical infrastructure which itself rendered the Company's position fragile. Subject to recurrent violence and declining agrarian productivity, British officers struggled to maintain the stable collection of revenue. In fact, during the first two decades of the 1800s, the East India Company stayed solvent because of its creative accounting, by counting income received from the sale of land not the taxation of agriculture and other productive processes. Between 1803-1812, 11% of the Company's revenue demand was met not from the collection of

⁴² J. Long, Magistrate of Rajahmundry, to George Strachey, 23 March 1816, IOR H/602, pp.157-9

⁴³ Arthur Cotton, "Report on the Irrigation of the Rajahmundry District," August 22, 1844, 1850 (127), Parliamentary Papers. For this argument in more detail see Jon Wilson, *India Conquered. Britain's Raj and the Chaos of Empire* (London, 2016), 270-4

rents, but ‘from the capital of strangers from other districts’, buying up estates in the vain hope they could bring them into profit. Of course few were able to.⁴⁴

A succession of flood years and poor harvests peaked with the great famine of 1832-3. Serious dearth occurred in 1838. Local officers calculated that the population of Godavari district declined from 738,000 to 561,000 between 1821 and 1842, through a combination of death and migration.⁴⁵ A lush, fertile region capable of sustaining high levels of agrarian production with some limited coordination, Godavari lost peasant labour to the much less productive soil of the dry interior region governed by the Nizam of Hyderabad. Critically for the East India Company, British officers finally started to note a fall in revenue collections, from Rs 18.7 lakhs to 13.7 lakhs between 1821 and 1838. By 1840, the decline in the region’s revenue collections led the Company to act, and a commissioner was sent to investigate and write a series of proposals to make the district’s revenue yield recover.⁴⁶

The details of the government’s response is beyond the scope of this article. In short, though, the Company’s failure to integrate local, pre-British idioms of authority into the structure of public power caused an intensification of British efforts at ‘modernisation’. If the permanent settlement was an effort to govern a society of strangers without engaging in the negotiations which local political commitments might entail, the public works projects which followed the Godavari famine were an effort to rule without engaging with people at all. Henry Montgomery’s complex report into the causes of famine recommended the construction of a state-sponsored irrigation system. The response to a collapse of governmental authority over people was to impose the East India Company’s power directly over the region’s natural resources.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Henry Montgomery to Chief Secretary, Fort St George, 18 March 1844, IOR P/280/44, 2191; G. N. Rao, “Canal Irrigation and Agrarian Change in Colonial Andhra, A Study of Godavari District, c.1850-1890,” *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 25, no. 1 (March 1, 1988): 25–60.

⁴⁵ Henry Morris, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Godavery District* (London, Trubner, 1878), 290–92

⁴⁶ Henry Montgomery, to Chief Secretary to Government, Fort St. George, 18 March 1844, IOR P/280/48, 2166

⁴⁷ Montgomery to Chief Secretary, 18 March 1844, IOR P/280/49, 2280

Montgomery's report led to the appointment of Arthur Cotton as engineer in charge of a new wave of irrigation works, with the sole aim of increasing the ability of the East India Company to collect its revenue demand. Cotton constructed an anicut (barrage) across the Godavari River a mile south of Rajahmundry, which then fed into an elaborate canal system to irrigate the delta with a stable flow of water. His system drew on both existing canals, and pre-British techniques for cheaply building a large dam. Strikingly though, Cotton's project was framed as another bold break with the past, and a disavowal of the importance of old waterworks. Like earlier attempts to introduce modern forms of governance such as the permanent settlement, Cotton's irrigation system relied heavily on existing structures and archaic social forms; but, just like the architects of those reforms, Cotton disavowed his dependence on the past.

Rajahmundry was, Cotton stated, 'entirely without any general system of irrigation, draining, embankments of communications'. There were some 'old works', he disparagingly said, 'but their complete restoration is not what the district needs'. Just as with the permanent settlement forty years before, the solution lay with the British state imposing a 'new system with the lone, unilateral force of its own power'.⁴⁸

The myth of the Godavari region is that that is exactly what happened. From famine and emigration in the 1830s, by 1900 the area became one of the most prosperous areas of the southern India. The town of Rajahmundry has recently opened one of the few museums to celebrate the life of a British imperial official, and statues of Sir Arthur Cotton are scattered through its traffic intersections. In fact though, as David Washbrook's early work demonstrated, the prosperity of the wet regions of southern India were based on the revival of dense patterns of local organisation, with the expansion of newspapers, district and taluq associations, co-operatives and, eventually, elite Indian involvement in local administration. Perhaps, and this is only a hypothesis, Godavari's later prosperity relied on the existence of spaces for local power-brokers to create authority which had been disabled earlier, and were absent elsewhere.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Cotton, 'Report on the Irrigation of the Rajahmundry District', 22 August 1844 I Copies of Letters of Major Arthur Cotton, *Parliamentary Papers* 1850 (127), 4; Sir Arthur Cotton, *Public Works in India* (London, 1854).

⁴⁹ David Washbrook, "Country Politics, Madras 1880 to 1930," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, 3 (1973), 475-531.

Yet the history of these new, late nineteenth-century forms of local Indian leadership is not one of straightforward ‘collaboration’ with the imperial state. Rajahmundry was a centre for late nineteenth-century nationalism. It became a focal point for agitation during the *swadeshi* movement in 1907. It was the site chosen for a series of speeches by the Bengali nationalist Bipin Chandra Pal, for example. The combination of support for modernist projects and rejection of the brute fact of imperial domination should not surprise us. Early twentieth century Indian nationalism claimed it could modernise – explicitly using that word - India without annihilating the local, affective bonds which it believed bound its compatriots together. It castigated what it saw as the violent materialism of western imperialism. But it rarely did so in the name of a rival homogenous culture, seeing modernity instead as a series of practices which had different lives in different environments. As I’ve argued in this article, those are arguments which might be usefully taken seriously now.